Neighboring counties playing role in Vision 2025's success

BY GREG OLIVER
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PICKENS — Pickens County Vision 2025 leaders say partnerships with neighboring Oconee and Anderson counties are playing a major role in realizing two economic development objectives common in the plan for all three counties.

"We brought together key people in both Anderson and Oconee counties that were interested in joint development of the equestrian potential in our counties and the creation of a small business incubator," past Chairman Gerald Sweitzer said in a news conference Wednesday. "Both initiatives are now being implemented."

According to Sweitzer, nearly 100 people gathered at the Anderson Civic Center earlier in the year to engage Clemson University and the Garrison Arena in a three-county joint equine effort. As a result, Sweitzer said the South Carolina Upstate Equine Council formed a nonprofit organization, complete with a board of directors from all three counties and 501(c)3 status.

"The economic impact of the equine industry in the three counties is $63 million," Sweitzer said. "The third-highest horse population in the state is among those three counties."

Creation of a small business incubator is something Sweitzer said is a popular concept in adjoining states, adding that North Carolina has 26 and Georgia 17. While South Carolina has four, none exist in the Upstate.

"We have reached the point where we're working with Tri-County Technical College as our educational institution and are seeking funding for a feasibility study," he said. "A tour of several small business incubators in adjoining states was arranged."

Sweitzer said a large contingent from the three counties visited the Asheville Buncombe County Technical College Small Business Incubator. In addition, a seminar with a leading small business incubator was also arranged to learn how to proceed to fund and create a small business incubator in the three counties.

"These are two concrete examples of crossing county lines, which we feel is important in working together," Sweitzer said. "It is really rewarding to see that we can work together if we really want to."

Vision 2025 Chairman Michael Sheriff said the 89 objectives of the plan are grouped into five goal areas — A Educated Community, A Working Community, A Healthy Community, A Sense of Place and an Educated Community. Sheriff said the role of the Vision 2025 Implementation Team is to facilitate local governments, organizations, individuals and the business community to adopt and implement the individual objectives.

Achievements in Pickens County that have already resulted include a vision partnership with the United Way Community Impact Task Forces on Education Development and Financial Stability, starting an e-mail newsletter on Vision 2025, serving on the citizen's advisory committee for the county comprehensive plan, with many vision plan objectives included in the June draft; and collaborating with Pickens and DNR in the development, clearing and construction of the new overlook at Sassafras Mountain — the highest point in South Carolina.

"Pickens County is strong in its heritage and culture, and we don't want to lose that," Sheriff said.

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